

# The DOC's War on Recidivism

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"Since he accepted the job of Indiana Department of Correction commissioner, J. David Donahue repeatedly has shown his understanding of the need to reduce recidivism. About 40 percent of prison inmates in Indiana are back behind bars within three years of their release. Lowering the recidivism rate reduces prison overcrowding, reduces crime and saves taxpayers money."

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Think of re-entry the way an astronaut might: Theoretically, you can go around and try again. But, realistically, you had better plan on getting it right the first time.

It isn't a lot different if you happen to be a prison inmate who has done his time and is preparing to re-enter society. Felons aiming at a straight-and-narrow path in their post-prison lives need to get it right the first time.

Since he accepted the job of Indiana Department of Correction commissioner, J. David Donahue repeatedly has shown his understanding of the need to reduce recidivism. About 40 percent of prison inmates in Indiana are back behind bars within three years of their release. Lowering the recidivism rate reduces prison overcrowding, reduces crime and saves taxpayers money.

Donahue has instituted a number of programs that make good use of the services supplied by other state agencies in an effort to help former wards of the DOC adjust to life on the outside. We have commented about them in past editorials. But we think the latest effort is the best yet: a collaboration with the Family and Social Services Administration to see that eligible mentally ill prison inmates continue to receive treatment and medication once they are released.

One reason that recidivism is so high is mental illness. Prison populations have increased since the 1980s in part because psychiatric hospitals have closed. While incarcerated mentally ill people do receive treatment while they're doing their time, up until now little has been done to help them continue to get mental health care as they return to society. Eighteen percent of the Indiana prison population

receive treatment for bipolar disease, addictions, schizophrenia or other mental disorders. Many are incarcerated at the DOC's psychiatric hospital at New Castle, where they get their meds and therapy on schedule.

Being released from prison has meant for many mentally ill inmates that there won't be anyone to make sure they take their medication -- assuming they have access to medication at all. Those without assets or family support have gone untreated or they have been faced with delays as they undertake the process of applying on their own for FSSA benefits.

At best, leaving the process up to the mentally ill prisoner creates the possibility of a serious gap in treatment. And going without anti-psychotic medications greatly increases the risk of criminal, anti-social behavior.

The agreement between the DOC and the FSSA involves prison and FSSA staff working together prior to prisoners' releases to establish benefit eligibility, locate service providers and eliminate treatment gaps.

Medicaid, the government health insurance program for the needy, pays for mental health care, including drugs. Prisoners also are assisted in applying for food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Prior to this plan, Donahue had worked out a deal with the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority to assure that prisoners have places to live upon release.

Other DOC re-entry programs that engage other state agencies are based at the Plainfield Re-entry Education Center, which is the former youth prison at Plainfield. Among them: setting up a Bureau of Motor Vehicles office in the prison to provide soon-to-be released convicts with the IDs they will have to have on the outside, and providing a full-time Department of Workforce Development staff member on site at Plainfield to assist with job placement.

The Plainfield program focuses on prisoners who will be living in the central Indiana area upon their release. We appreciate the need to start such a comprehensive endeavor with a manageable model, but we surely would like to see the Plainfield program expanded to include prisoners who will live in other parts of the state. We trust that Donahue, who clearly understands his mission well, would like to see that, too.

In the meantime, with the announcement of the statewide DOC-FSSA collaboration on behalf of mentally ill prisoners, it is very reassuring to watch DOC plans for rehabilitation continue to unfold in such a positive, practical way.

## **About The Department of Correction**

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The

Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.

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